



Woman in the Male perspective—A Comparison of the Portrayal of Women in the Border Town and the Wen Town

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Abstract. Based on a close textual reading of *The Border Town* and *The Wen town*, this paper analyzes and compare the characteristics between Cui Cui and Xiao Mei in this two works. The paper seeks to clarify the different female views between Shen Cong Wen and Yu Hua, and speculate on the writers' signified and influences.

Keywords: The Wen Town · The Border Town · Yu Hua · Shen Congwen · feminism

1 Introduction

As a leader in contemporary Chinese fiction writers, Yu Hua has been marked as an excellent pioneer writer for a long time, yet there are extremely obvious stylistic shifts in his works. With regard to *The Wen Town*, Yu Hua abandoned both exploratory and experimental writing and did not continue the realist style, but instead turned to popular fiction full of romanticism and with a legendary nature [1]. Written in the 1930 s, the romantic and idyllic pastoral mood and idiosyncratic literary concept of *The Border Town* made itself and Shen Congwen unique in the history of Chinese literature. This two works were written half a century apart, and both coincidentally chose as their content the entanglement of characters in a southern water village somewhere in the context of the late Qing Dynasty and early Civil War. The image of two heroines is to some extent strikingly consistent, but at the same time, their different experiences and choices predestine the authors to place different ideas on them. This paper attempts to analyze the different views of women of the two writers and the influencing factors from the characteristics of heroines in works.

2 Loss of Female Independence

2.1 Voice Denied

The Wen Town began to be written around 1998, around the same time as another novel *To Live*, which pushed Yu Hua's reputation to the top. However, *The Wen Town*

is considered mediocre. This “unconventional saga novel that distinguishes itself from realistic works” [2] was criticized by critics for its flat and crude characterization. Yu Hua seems to be using narrative trickery to get the reader into an emotional explosion in the midst of an exciting plot, and does not intend to be perfect in his portrayal of the characters that has been wildly popular since the founding of New China. Whether it is the benevolent guardians of Xi Town, Lin Xiangfu and Gu Yimin, or the brutal and unforgiving bandit Zhang Yixiang, the main human complexities are dissolved and replaced by simple and brutal good and evil. Yu Hua wrestles the subject away from the characterization feature that allows the writer to better grasp the ideological concept expressed in the work. In the first half of the novel, the heroine, Xiao Mei, is always in an unusually ambiguous state. The reader is cut from Lin Xiangfu’s point of view. The first time he meets Xiao Mei, “two people standing outside the gate of his house talking, their speech was fast, as if every word was flying”, which is followed by Lin Xiangfu’s suspicion of Ji Xiaomei and Shen Zuqiang’s identity as brother and sister. So how should Xiao Mei construct identity?

Yu Hua quickly gives his answer-through the environment and other people.

Xiao Mei said few word. On the night she first met Lin Xiangfu, she appeared to the stranger as a woman with a smile in her eyes but who rarely spoke. The Spair-Wolf hypothesis holds that the language we speak determines our thinking. Although this view cannot be said to be entirely correct, it can be confired that language does, to a certain extent, reflect and react on human thinking. When Yu Hua described Xiao Mei’s language, he rarely wrote about the words she actively spoke. Xiao Mei was often in a passive position to answer in conversations. When she faced Lin Xiangfu, her first sentence was in response to his curiosity about the pattern of the turban, and her first sentence when she returned with her baby was in response to his question, “Is that Xiao Mei?” which is a self-talking question. When Xiao Mei broke her mother-in-law’s taboo twice, she never took the initiative to defend herself, but only answered the breathless question, “Which commandment did you break?”. Language is a concrete expression of ideology, and her loss of control over it is tantamount to handing over her self to others. This situation began when she entered the cruel role of child bride. When Xiao Mei, still young and active, was caught by her mother- in-law for stealing a flowered dress and faced the prospect of being “returned”, she is literally attacked by the feudal society, and, unable to resist, she can only listen to the voice of the powerful and transform herself.

Cui Cui was obviously much happier and freer than Xiao Mei. She had a grand father who loves her, and the simple customs of Chardon allowed her to grow up in the natural comfort. The mountains, rivers and streams gave Cui Cui, who was a child of nature, a place to grow freely and give her an independent mind and will. When she first meets with NuoSong, she first emphasized that she was “Cui Cui” and then said that she was “the granddaughter of the ferryman who holds the rocky river in Bixi” [3]. Cui Cui also had a rebellious side, and did not hesitate to scold NuoSong when she misunderstood he was trying to bully her. However, Cui Cui was an unquestionable lapsed speaker in her choice of love. In the plot design of *The Border Town*, Cui Cui was still “voluntarily” losing her “voice” and letting her grandfather speak on her behalf because of her shy education hidden in her bones, not because of any explicit external coercion. Then the seemingly free space for women to exist in the story suddenly loses

its support and collapses. Women appear to have selves, but in reality they are merely influenced by patriarchal values and dependent on the patriarchal world. In this situation, the credibility of women's voices is greatly diminished; their so-called personhood is only revealed with the permission of men, and once the boundaries of a patriarchal society are touched, women lose their voices completely [4].

2.2 Personality Constructing Delivered to Others

Cui Cui had already made up her mind about matrimony and bridegroom. Physically, however, she was gradually maturing sexually, and her thoughts about sex were indeed becoming more and more secretive. While she certainly had an innocent and pure yearning for love, she kept this emotion close, and even the only relative, grandpa, could only understand a little through laborious speculation. When Nuosong happily invited Cui Cui to his home, Cui Cui just refused with bashfulness, cutting off the opportunity to be with her beloved. Although Tianbao and Nuosong both adored her, the impression of her really could not be said to be Cui Cui herself, but in the few encounters in the glimpses of hints. In the story, we don't even know if Tianbao and Cui Cui had ever met. When Tianbao first told grandpa of his love for Cui Cui, the reason was simply that she was "so beautiful, like a goddess of mercy", and then he said that he wanted a lover who could listen to his singing but "can't lose a wife who is good at take care of the household". The situation of Nuosong was not much better than of his brother. He personally wanted to make contact with Cui Cui, but when she saw him, she either dodged and refused or preferred to "act like she is chasing a duck" and run away. It doesn't mean that Cui Cui disliked Nuosong, reversally it's precisely a kind of squirm in the face of lover. It is not difficult to know Cui Cui's personality of generosity through the conversation with passengers and local residents' love for her. This personality was anachronistically bound up in the feudal ideology of a male-dominated society in the face of the need to actively express her own love. Cui Cui's identity is a failure. Her ambivalent attitudes in the face of different situations invariably indicate that her identity is being internalized and eaten away by social norms.

The othering of Xiao Mei's personality is even more obvious. The contrast between her personality before and after is very stark. When she was a child, Xiao Mei was a girl with an "overactive mind" who laughed when she was happy and cried when she was sad. She loved beautiful clothes. Qiang could see the "golden color" in her eyes when she was wearing beautiful dress. But under the strict discipline of her mother-in-law, she was cut off from past self and could only spend days wearing worn-out linen clothes, learning weaving without saying a word and indulging in household chores. Yu Hua also directly points out that "the mother-in-law moulds Xiao Mei in her own image". The flowered garment is a symbolic object, symbolizing Xiao Mei's personality. The flowered garment that she longed for was buried in the grave-like gloomy closet and her personality died with it. Karl Marx argued that conscious life activity directly distinguished the life activity of humans from that of animals. Xiao Mei's subjectivity as a child bride in the textile family was erased and became a vehicle for her mother-in-law to map and create another self. The subjective existence of the female is intentionally erased, while the other perpetrator of violence happens to be the same female, and instead the father-in-law and husband, who are male, still have understanding and sympathy for

Xiao Mei. This paradoxical scene demonstrates the situation of women being allowed to exist only as a group in feudal society while being deprived of class existence.

Another kind of trampling on Xiao Mei's own personality lies in the forgetfulness of names. The name is the important marker of identity, like the second life. In most cases, this "death" occurs after the fall of the body, but Xiao Mei has not even matured physically before she meets her social "death".

3 The Squeeze on Women's Live

In terms of the proximity of locations, in her fleeting happiness, Xiao Mei has been to Shanghai and reached the far north where Lin Xiangfu is located, a place that the vast majority of people in Xi Town and Wanmu Dang would never reach in their lifetime. But this could not conceal the smallness of her existence. Apart from her brief childhood in the Kee family in Wanmu Dang, an invisible thick barrier trapped her in the textile house. "They are self-contained, separated from the other children, or from their childhood", as mentioned at the beginning of "The Mending". The status of child bride confines Xiao Mei had a brief moment of fleeting freedom. This freedom remained practically dependent on Shen Zuqiang. So when Xiao Mei saw Lin Xiangfu's gold bars, she perferred to give up stable, free life and must abandon her daughter to rejoin Qiang. Yet she was so insistent that she did not want to see them again. But Xiao Mei had lost the ability to accept this new life. She could not leave Qiang, whose weakness and incompetence prevent him from leaving parents' cloth house. So wherever she was, what always guided Xiao Mei was to return to Xi Town, to the cloth house, to the place that destroyed her and raised her [5].

Cui Cui, on the one other hand, seems to be a footloose self, but on the other hand, her freedom are limited to the green mountains and water of Chadong. In the late of Qing Dynasty, transportation was difficult and women were low status. The so-called homeland was actually an old prison. When Tianbao learnt that the man Cui Cui loved was not him, he could just set up a boat and leave. However, Cui Cui and her mother did not have the ability to leave Chardon. The love in The Border Town was tragic. Cui Cui's mother fell in love with the officer and the two meet to elope, but Cui Cui's mother finally refused because of her unbreakable feelings for the place. When Cui Cui was born, the only way to get her to leave was to deliberately drink cold water at the river and died. The traged of the parents' love is a metaphor for Cui Cui's future. When Shen Congwen writing The Border Town, he always grasped a kind of ambiguity and uncertainty, until the end, it was still unknown whether Cui Cui and Nuosong would get marry. This ambiguity is actually very narrow, confined to whether Nuosong would come back. But whether or not he would return, it was clear to us that Cui Cui would marry and spend her life in a feudal family in the end.

4 Lack of Recognition of the Value of Women

Nietsche said that man should be an end in himdelf and not an instrument. In her ignorant childhood, Xiao Mei was sold to Shen as a child bride in order to alleviate her family's poverty. In this process, Xiao Mei's ability to create value as an individual was not

recognized, and she was completely treated as the commodity. After arriving at Shen, mother-in-law did not like her “overactive mind” and “love of beauty” first and then affirmed her when she saw that Xiao Mei was diligent and conscientious in her work. It is not difficult to see that her mother-in-law’s strong desire to control her is also evident in the fact that she believed that she owned Xiao Mei’s life. This characteristic is also reflected in the fact that Xiao Mei worked hard but never got paid. Xiao Mei work for the cloth house, but not even a single penny belongs to her, so much so that she was considered to be “stealing” and swept out just for giving some money to help her brother. During her escape, Xiao Mei was clearly a good worker, but Yu Hua had to arrange her to steal Lin Xiangfu’s money.

This is very similar to Cui Cui’s situation. Cui Cui was very capable of ferrying, but after her grandfather’s death, the first came to Shun Shun and others’ mind was to find someone to take over the boatman’s position and take care his orphaned daughter Cui Cui. This is certainly a simple kindness, but what everyone overlooks was that Cui Cui was good enough to survive one her own. She did not panic after grandfather’s death. She prepared to boil hot water to clean dead grandpa, not losing mind the whole process [6]. The only occupation of women in the entire novel is that of prostitute, as if women are born as commodities and have no other value.

5 Difference

Shen Congwen and Yu Hua are from two different eras. Shen Congwen was born in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period, and he yearned for the purity of nature, but his perception of women was still in a relatively backward state. Therefore, he gave his Cui Cui the attribute of a natural woman who was not tainted with the dust of the world, while at the same time trapping her in the shackles of feudal society on women. Yu Hua grew up in the new China, and his Ji Xiaomei was already a mature woman who did not shy away from talking about sex. Compared to Cui Cui’s ignorant state, Xiao Mei, as an adult, had certain willful awakening-like, seemingly out-of-the-ordinary actions in choosing a different path. If Cui Cui and *The Border City* roll into one, then Xiao Mei was an outlier. Yu Hua had to use author’s prerogative to bring her back to the “right path”. Both novels take place in a setting that is invariably shrouded in the shadow of death, Xiao Mei’s suffocating life as a child bride under the strict discipline of her mother-in-law in cloth house, the bloody scenes of the village’s confrontation with bandits, and Xiao Mei’s fatal prayer at the end of her life in the snow. Cui Cui, on the other hand, is shrouded in the shadow of death from the beginning of her life, when her mother “died drinking cold water at the river”, when the eldest drowns in the river, and when her grandpa died in a thunder on a night. Although Cui Cui was alive, the people she was associated with were all died, and the image of “water” that takes them away was always with her. Cui Cui seems to foreshadow the continuation of the female condition in this shadow, and Xiao Mei is more like the end of this destiny.

6 Conclusion

The portrayal of characters in traditional novels is a crucial part content expression. The success of *The Border Town* lies not only in the lament of love in the midst of beautiful

nature, but also in Shen Congwen's unique understanding of women, who creates the special character of Cui Cui. The reader is attracted to her unique personality and never forgets the series of women's sorrows she represents. The stories in *The Border City* and *The Wen Town* develop in a similar time frame, yet the two writer's view of women is a progressive shift.

Depictions of violence and sex seem to be an integral part of Yu Hua's work. While this part is not lacking in *The Wen Town*, the more prominent is the warmth of it. Yu Hua is gentler to Xiao Mei than any previous female characters, and he gives her the awakening of will that she could have in that social environment. In this way, Yu Hua's view of women is more progressive than Shen Congwen. But many of Xiao Mei's thoughts and actions still do not show enough resistance, and she did not yet have a clear perception of the unjust position she is in, which is a limitation of the portrayal of women in *The Wen Town*.

Shen Congwen and Yu Hua presented women different in their writing due to the different times they live in. But in this post-historical influence of Chinese culture, being in the new century and being a member of it, questions about women require further reflection.

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